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AUTHOR	Sinclair, Mary F.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This policy brief discusses the impact on students with disabilities of educational reforms that emphasize higher academic standards for all students and zero tolerance policies to make schools safe learning environments for all students. The public's demand for higher standards and safe environments is also explored. The development of academic standards and behavioral standards in educational laws and state policies is documented. Examples of local practices and policies that influence students' engagement with school and ways to help youth meet higher academic and behavioral standards are presented. The approaches are based on the experiences of three projects that tested strategies for keeping middle school students in school within a climate of low tolerance for atypical behavior and increasing demands for academic excellence. Five key intervention strategies were common to the three projects and are identified: Persistence-Plus, monitoring, relationships, affiliation, and problem-solving. In addition, recommendations are given for how schools can evaluate the potential impact of their own school policies and practices on their students' connection to school and progress toward school completion. A list of related publications is provided. (Contains 37 references.) (CR)

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ED 404 793

Policy Research Brief

CENTER ON RESIDENTIAL SERVICES AND COMMUNITY LIVING
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

On a Collision Course? Standards, Discipline, and Students with Disabilities

Two primary educational reforms of this decade emphasize the need for higher academic standards for all students, and zero tolerance policies to make schools safe learning environments for all students. These reforms potentially signal trouble for students with disabilities. This Policy Research Brief explores these educational reforms and the ways in which they may challenge youth at high risk for school failure, and identifies strategies for policy implementation that can help high risk students to remain in school and meet these higher standards. This issue was authored by Mary F. Sinclair, Martha L. Thurlow, Sandra L. Christenson, and David L. Evelo, who are co-directors of the Check and Connect Dropout Prevention and Intervention Projects, which began as a collaboration between the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota and the Minneapolis Public Schools. Melissa Y. Kau assisted with the development of the Brief. The project was funded in part by Grant #H023A40019 from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education.

■ Introduction

Michael* is a young man, currently 17 years of age. He is described as a clean-cut kid who dresses nicely and has a clever sense of humor. Some teachers believe he is a smart-alec middle-class kid. Those who know him better know that Michael works hard at fitting in and concealing the homelessness and condemned buildings in which he had lived with his parents all through middle school. Michael has to work hard to keep up with his school work and receives special education services for a learning disability and behavioral problems.

* *Pseudonym*

Michael was first introduced in the April 1994 *Policy Research Brief* (Vol. 6, No. 1) when he was in eighth grade. At that time, he was struggling to remain in school. Michael had a history of being truant and was suspended from middle school a number of times for reasons defined as "failure to comply with a reasonable request" and "verbal abuse toward school personnel." When we last left Michael, he had been suspended for swearing at the physical education teacher, who reported that Michael never attended class and did not have gym clothes when he was in attendance.

Michael participated in the Check and Connect Dropout Intervention and Prevention Project through seventh and eighth grades along with 200 other students who had active Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for a learning or emotional/behavioral disability. Michael and about 45 of the original 200 students continued with Check and Connect for the first two years of high school. Over these past four years, Michael and his family worked with the same project staff person, referred to as a monitor. The monitor's role has been to help Michael stay engaged in school and keep on-track to graduate. The monitor developed a trusting relationship with Michael, his parents and sister through time and persistence. Michael found that he could not get away with skipping difficult classes or classes with "disagreeable" teachers for too long without his monitor finding out and holding him accountable. Michael would often say, "How do you do that – everywhere I go, I turn around and there you are?"

Michael was promoted to 9th grade even though his attendance was sporadic during middle school. As a result of

A summary of research on policy issues affecting persons with developmental disabilities. Published by the Research and Training Center on Residential Services and Community Living, Institute on Community Integration (UAP), College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota.

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maturation and support from his monitor (including ongoing conversations about logical consequences), Michael did not engage in power struggles with his teachers to the degree demonstrated during middle school. He also moved in with his sister, which provided him further stability.

Even though Michael accrued all of his 9th grade credits, the year was not trouble free. At one point, the assistant principal tried to expel Michael from the district for possession of a weapon. The weapon was a paper clip and a rubberband. Michael's monitor talked with the assistant principal about the excessiveness of the consequence in relationship to the behavior, and the underlying intention of the discipline policy. The monitor shared information with the assistant principal about the costs associated with students who are suspended, expelled, or who drop out of school – costs to society and to the youth themselves. As a result of the problem-solving discussion, Michael was suspended for three days, rather than expelled from school.

This incident was not the only problem Michael encountered during 9th grade. He was also involved in stealing a car and joy riding with a couple of his friends. The youth were caught and sent to court. Michael's parents, his sister, and the monitor appeared with Michael before the judge. Because of their support, the existence of no prior offenses, and passing grades, the judge released Michael with a warning and a fine for restitution payments.

Michael now lives with his sister in their grandmother's hometown about four hours outside of the city. Michael's parents stay in touch with him, although they still live in a homeless shelter. His monitor continues to call him every couple of months. Michael reports that he is doing well, going to school, and still earning credits toward graduation.

If Michael had been expelled for his "weapon," it is unlikely that he would still be in school and making progress toward graduation. As this example shows, education may be on a collision course for students who have disabilities, where higher academic and behavioral standards challenge students who do not have the skills and supports needed to help them remain in school. What does it mean to have higher academic and behavioral standards? What are the supports that students need to be able to stay in school and be successful? Can schools reach for higher standards and safe schools at the same time that they encourage *all* students, even the most challenging, to remain in school?

The past decade of educational policy reflects dissatisfaction with the performance of students and the competitiveness of the United States in a global economy, and frustration over the rise in violence. As a result, the 1980s was a time of school reform and restructuring initiatives that led to the emergence of standards for both academics and behavior. As educators push to redesign schools and improve student performance, it becomes important to define and document success and improvement over time.

In 1989, the states' governors voiced their strong opinions about the need for educational reform by identifying education goals for the nation. Most states and many local school districts used these goals to develop their own sets of goals and standards. The public now expects schools to operate under a set of clearly articulated and measurable goals, and educators are expected to hold students and themselves accountable for meeting those goals. The bottom line of most of these reforms is that students are being held to higher standards of academic and behavioral performance.

Academics is moving away from minimum competencies toward high content and performance standards. Assessments are being aligned with the standards, and significant consequences are being associated with performance on the assessments, from school accreditation and rewards or sanctions, to the awarding of student diplomas (Bond, Braskamp, & Roeber, 1996). School discipline policies and the behavioral standards that they reflect are mirroring society's policy of "being tough on crime." In the name of school safety, stiffer punishments and minimal leniency underlie the spirit of school discipline policies and practices.

Two important questions must be asked in the face of these educational policy changes: *What are the implications of the higher standards for students at high risk for school failure, particularly students receiving special education services? What policies are in place that will provide* all *students with the opportunities to successfully meet these new academic and behavioral standards?*

Possible answers to these questions are presented below, including examples of local practices and policies that influence students' engagement with school and ways to help youth meet higher academic and behavioral standards. These approaches are based on the experiences of three projects that tested strategies for keeping students in school within a climate of low tolerance for atypical behavior and increasing demands for academic excellence. In addition, recommendations are given for how schools can evaluate the potential impact of their own school policies and practices on their students' connection to school and progress toward school completion.

■ The Risk: Higher Standards for All Students

Higher academic and behavioral standards that potentially could increase the nation's dropout rate are being implemented in schools across the country. Yet, recent opinion polls suggest that the public is willing to take this risk in order to improve the outcomes of education. The following are among several conclusions drawn from a 1996 poll by the Public Agenda (Immerwahr & Johnson, 1996):

- **Support for standards is firm**. "Opinion research suggests that the public's support for standards has considerable depth, and that people are willing to stand by their commitment even when they consider tradeoffs – such as the possibility that more youngsters may drop out of school or be failed" (p. 15).
- **Standards will help children from all backgrounds learn**. "People think that if the standards are clear (and high), most students will learn more. And people completely reject the proposition that standards should be lowered for youngsters from inner cities or other disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, many Americans – especially African-American parents and inner-city residents – believe that one of the biggest problems in inner-city schools is that expectations are too low" (p. 19).
- **One pitfall to avoid is ignoring concerns about safety and discipline**. "People just do not believe that youngsters can learn much of anything in an environment that is unsafe, where they feel frightened or intimidated, or where there is no sense of order and discipline. . . . Americans' most pressing concerns about public schools are safety, order, and the basics" (p. 32).

These viewpoints are on a collision course with what we know happens when students drop out of school (Table 1). The quest for higher standards must be accompanied by opportunities for *all* students to succeed, particularly those students with learning and behavioral difficulties with whom schools have not always been very successful in the past.

Academic Standards

The notion of increasing the rigor of academic standards was first introduced by the governors as one of the national education goals. Goal 3 states:

> All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy.

The focus of Goal 3 eventually became only core academic content areas (National Education Goals Panel, 1993).

Academic standards permeate educational law and state policy:

- **Academic standards permeate educational laws**. The pursuit of higher academic standards is now in law through several pieces of federal education legislation. The primary driving force for academic standards is the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. In this federal law, skills standards also are promoted and are linked to post-school vocations. The notion of academic standards is carried further in the Improving America's Schools Act, which replaced the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This law requires students in Title I to be evaluated using statewide assessments (which should be aligned to the state standards), rather than other measures.
  At one point, there was considerable effort devoted to developing national standards in the academic areas identified in Goal 3, along with other content areas. While the notion of *national* standards fell into disfavor in the mid 1990s, most states were already well into the process of developing their own content and performance standards (American Federation of Teachers, 1995). Following the development of standards, states quickly moved toward aligning their assessments with their new education goals.
- **Academic standards permeate state policies**. In 1995, there were 18 states that required students to pass a state assessment in order to receive a diploma (Bond et al., 1996); some of these states and other states as well require students to pass an exam to be promoted from one grade to the next (Bond et al., 1996). The implicit and over simplistic assumption often underlying these approaches to standards is that school failure can be attributed solely to the student and his or her lack of effort. This kind of message promotes student failure. Indeed, an analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) data indicated that eighth grade students with minimum competency testing requirements dropped out at double the rate of students without the testing requirements (8.8% as opposed to 4.2%) (Reardon, 1996). Yet, the number of states taking this approach continues to increase, with at least four new states expected to have added graduation exams before the year 2000. But very few states consider the influence of other contributing factors on student outcomes, such as instructional strate-

Table 1: The Costs of Dropping Out

- The annual cost of providing for dropouts and their families is more than $76 billion a year. For every taxpayer, that means about $800 a year in taxes. (Joint Economic Committee, 1991)
- 80% of federal prisoners have not completed high school. (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995)
- During their working lives, dropouts will earn approximately $200,000 less than those who do complete high school but do not attend college. (Nichols & Nichols, 1990)

gies, teacher quality, classroom learning environment, relevancy of the curriculum, parental support for learning, or community involvement. Missing from state policies are lines of accountability for teachers, schools, parents, and communities.

The American Federation of Teachers (1995) mentions the need to provide resources and assistance to those students in danger of failing to meet the new expectations. It is suggested that the first domino, a strong set of standards, will start a chain reaction, freeing up the necessary energies and resources to improve the academic performance of all students, regardless of background or neighborhood. This vision of the future is one in which the school system responds with appropriate assistance and intervention for students who do not pass the periodic standards tests and in which all components of the school system are devoted to helping students achieve the standards.

The Education Commission of the States (1996) also has emphasized the need for schools to provide students with the opportunity to meet the new expectations: "By requiring all students to master challenging subject matter – and by providing them with the time and tools to do so – standards also enhance educational equity. The goal is to raise both the ceiling and the floor of student achievement" (p. 6). Whether this actually can happen remains to be seen.

It is clear, however, that the public believes that students cannot be expected to reach high standards unless they are in safe, orderly, and non-violent learning environments (Immerwahr & Johnson, 1996). Just as there is a tremendous push for higher standards and significant consequences for reaching (or not reaching) those standards, there is an equally strong push for schools to develop strict behavioral standards, with significant consequences for violating those standards.

Behavioral Standards

Behavioral standards are not usually presented to the public as standards. Rather, they have been defined in terms of safety, stricter discipline, zero-tolerance policies, and an array of violence prevention approaches. These terms all reflect a concern expressed by parents, students, and teachers that student behavior is a problem in schools. For example, a recent poll (Harris, 1993) indicated that only 24% of parents thought that most students are safe from violence in the schools. In another study (Sheley, McGee, & Wright, 1992), nearly 40% of students indicated that they had observed violence at school. Teachers also express concern about safety in the schools. Although they are more likely overall to feel safer than students, they are also more likely to view violence as increasing if they think that their school provides only a fair or poor education to students (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1993).

The term "zero tolerance," in particular, refers to both policy and an attitude toward violence and problem behaviors in the public schools. Advocates of zero tolerance support strict consequences for inappropriate behavior. When the governors delineated the national education goals, they included a goal directed at this concern. Goal 7 states: "Every school in America will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning" (National Education Goals Panel, 1993).

Behavioral standards permeate educational laws and state policies:

- **Behavioral standards permeate educational laws**. The pursuit of safe, drug-free, violence-free, alcohol-free, and weapon-free schools is in several federal education laws. Like academic standards, the behavioral standards are in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. The focus on safe schools is reiterated in several Acts designed to provide funds to local schools and school districts. For example, the Safe Schools Act of 1994 provided funds to school districts that have high rates of youth violence, to support the reduction of violence and the promotion of school safety. The Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 1994 provided funds to schools and communities to prevent violence in and around schools. The Family and Community Endeavor Schools Act provided grants to "improve the overall development of at-risk children in communities with significant poverty and violent crime" (GAO, 1995). With federal funding uncertain, some of these programs have moved in and out of the proposed funding stream. Clearly, however, much thought and energy have been devoted at the federal level to the development of educational laws and implementation strategies indirectly or directly related to behavioral standards.

- **Behavioral standards permeate state policies**. States are carrying forward the initiatives started at the federal level, as well as creating their own. Concerns about unsafe schools in states reflect the 26% increase in delinquency cases that has been observed over a period of just five years, and the disproportionate increase in violent offenses and weapon law violations among juveniles (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995). Several of the recent education laws passed by states focus specifically on corporal punishment (e.g., allowing for the use of physical discipline or providing teachers immunity for certain punishment actions) and suspensions/expulsions (e.g., requiring that a student carrying a weapon be expelled) (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

  Recent studies in Delaware (Brooks, 1996; Delaware State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction, 1996), Kansas (Cooley, 1995), and Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, 1996) suggest that student suspensions and expul-

sions are a frequent reaction to students' failure to abide by behavioral standards in the school, and that about 25% of the actions can be assigned to special education students (see Table 2). The consequences being imposed for student misbehavior are becoming more punitive, despite a broader literature that suggests punishment is rarely a better alternative than prevention (Mendel, 1995).

State and federal policy about academic and behavioral standards suggests that limited attention is being given to the development of policy language, incentives, or mechanisms that would establish opportunities for all students to successfully perform at higher levels. This same pattern is reflected at the local level. The barriers confronted by many youth consistently outweigh the support systems available in the schools, home and community that could empower students to remain engaged in school through graduation.

Common policies and practices that influence students' engagement in school were identified in three urban school districts in the report *Tip the Balance* (Christenson, Sinclair, Evelo, & Thurlow, 1995). That report suggested that local efforts to make accommodations for students' academic needs or to establish preventive discipline procedures were not the rule, but rather the exception. Two of the most typical barriers to school engagement that consistently placed youth with learning and behavioral disabilities in the three projects at higher risk for dropping out were:

- **Failure to make instructional accommodations for students being served in general education classrooms**. Examples of this barrier were found in the schools that did not provide time and resources to allow special and regular education teachers to plan for the individual instructional needs of youth with disabilities. Another common barrier to academic support was teachers who required every student to do the exact same work, such as complete nine worksheet packets per grading period, regardless of the specific educational and special needs of the students.
- **Punitive disciplinary practices not designed to change behavior**. A frequently occurring example of this barrier was discipline policies on absences. Rather than finding ways to keep students in school, missing school was increased through the use of out-of-school suspensions for nonviolent behaviors, such as tardiness or a string of unexcused absences.

Additional factors across the three projects accounted for the difficulty educators may experience trying to systematically create opportunities for students to meet the higher academic standards and to develop preventive disciplinary policies and practices. The barriers ranged from district level barriers to school and individual level obstacles. The most problematic factors reported by the projects portray a complex set of interactions. The staff in the urban school districts were characterized as being overwhelmed by many issues and limited as a whole on their views of staff roles and responsibilities. District- and school-level uncertainty was prevalent, resulting in last-minute planning and chaotic implementation. Systemic disincentives to change and innovation were evident. The service delivery system for youth

Table 2: Highlights from Recent State Reports on Suspensions and Expulsions

From Delaware:

- The total number of school days missed due to out-of-school suspension during the 1994-95 academic year was 56,697. This resulted in the absence of about 315 pupils per school day. (Delaware State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction and Department of Public Instruction, p. iii)
- Of the total 25,357 incidents of out-of-school suspension during 1994-95, special education students accounted for 5,778 incidents, or 23%. (Brooks, Table 1)

From Kansas:

- Students with disabilities are more than two times as likely to be suspended or expelled than are other students. (Cooley, Study Highlights)
- The motives attributed to the acts for which students were suspended or expelled are generally the same for students with and without disabilities. Only in two minor areas is there a difference that is statistically significant. Students in special education were seen as more likely to act either *out of fear* or from *not having the ability to understand* more frequently than students in regular education. (Cooley, Study Highlights)

From Minnesota:

- The majority of suspensions (70-80%) occurred for incidents involving physical or verbal assault, disrespect/defiance, and attendance. (Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, Executive Summary)
- Almost all students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) who were suspended have either an emotional/behavior disorder (E/BD) or specific learning disability (SLD). (Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, Executive Summary)

in school and across systems was fragmented. Schools failed to adequately use or reach out to community and family resources. And on average, school personnel rigidly adhered to roles and boundaries that failed to meet the needs of many urban adolescents.

There are multiple examples of these kinds of complicating factors. They permeated the buildings in which the projects were located. Among the examples were the following:

- **Schools often did not develop clearly defined job descriptions** for their staff when the needs of the students exceeded basic instructional supports. Furthermore, school districts frequently failed to provide staff with the necessary resources to meet their students' needs.
- **Long-term planning was uncommon with districts and school buildings**. Programming funds were often not made available until the middle of the summer – allowing for only two to three weeks, rather than the necessary two to three months, of planning and implementation time.
- **Union policies created barriers**. They allowed teachers to bid into new positions based on seniority and minimum competencies, giving program directors little or no power to match the skills and interests of individuals hired into their programs.
- **Highly specialized support programs and services were rarely well coordinated** nor systematically offered in all schools within a district, so that services were delivered in piecemeal fashion.
- **Teachers more and more often were refusing to deal with adolescent behavioral needs**, sending any disruptive student to the office without any discussion with the student.
- **Some teachers would routinely use lecture and worksheet formats** under the assumption that the student was solely responsible for staying motivated.

In general, the three projects discovered that a weak infrastructure within the school environment interfered with optimal achievement. A weak infrastructure was defined by such things as minimal amounts of teacher planning time, inadequate communication systems for school personnel, limited financial and educational resources, and school staff who were underprepared to deal with the challenging needs of today's youth. Families encountered excessive demands and stresses on a daily basis, including mobility, poverty, safety, health and disability issues. The repeated challenge of finding new housing, for example, and moving to a new location without a car – or the resources to afford the move – interfered with a family's ability to promote regular school attendance, to provide youth with quiet study space in the home, or to be contacted by schools. Fragmented services in the community were problematic and characterized by turf battles or disjointed and often inaccessible resources. In some cases, waiting lists at community mental health centers were over six months long. High rates of community staff turnover made it difficult for school staff to establish an enduring or efficient relationship with support service organizations. All of these kinds of complicating factors raise the level of barriers until they are nearly insurmountable.

■ The Challenge: Creating Opportunities for Students

The standards-led reform initiative, with its focus on both academics and behavior, is likely to increase students' risk for dropping out, particularly if there is no plan for creating opportunities for students to achieve the standards. Another recent report, called *Staying in School*, identifies strategies that will help keep youth engaged in school through graduation (Thurlow, Christenson, Sinclair, Evelo, & Thornton, 1995). This report is based on the shared experiences and findings of the three dropout prevention projects.

Key Strategies

The projects targeted middle school students with learning and emotional/behavioral disabilities at high risk for dropping out. Five key intervention strategies were common to the three projects: Persistence-Plus, monitoring, relationships, affiliation, and problem-solving.

- **Persistence-Plus**. Persistence-Plus refers to persistence, continuity, and consistency. When students reach a point of disengaging from school (i.e., showing signs of dropping out), school personnel need to exhibit all three of these elements in efforts to reconnect students to the school. *Persistence* means that there is someone who is not going to give up on the student or allow the student to be distracted from the importance of school. *Continuity* means that there is someone who knows the student's needs who is available throughout the school year, through the summer, and into the next year. *Consistency* means that the message is the same from all concerned, only increasing or decreasing in intensity as conditions prescribe. To the extent possible, the same person should provide continuity and consistency. When it is not possible, the same message is always given: *do the work, attend classes, be on time, express frustration in a constructive manner, and stay in school.* Persistence-Plus is critical for students at risk for dropping out of school.

The report suggested that there are no good reasons for discontinuing work with students – not even if they are repeatedly truant, suspended, or on the run. Even for students who have made the decision not to return to school, the "message" must continue to be clear and from

a key person who is connected with the student: *It's important to be in school, and when you [the student] are ready, I will be available to help you return to school.* While Persistence-Plus was reported to be the most crucial strategy, it is interrelated to the strategies below.

- **Monitoring**. This strategy refers to keeping on top of what students are doing in school. The purpose of monitoring is to target the occurrence of risk behaviors and to measure the effects of interventions applied as a result of the occurrence of risk behaviors. Although some schools have computerized attendance and behavior records, these records are not usually used in a way that provides *timely* information on the key indicators of risk that need to be monitored. These indicators of risk include tardies, skipped classes, absenteeism, behavioral referrals, suspensions, and poor academic performance.
- **Relationships**. Another key element is relationship building. Most often, relationship building focuses on the adult-student relationship. The foundation of the relationship is based on the premise that an adult associated with the school cares about the student's educational experience, and both notices and acknowledges the youth's educational progress. Students' absences should not pass without comment nor should students' improvements go unrecognized.
- **Affiliation**. This strategy refers to the student's connection to the school and sense of belonging to the community of students and staff. Usually, this connection is promoted by the participation of the student in school-related activities. Frequently these activities are extracurricular, in which the student participates after school or sometime during the day.
- **Problem-solving**. Problem-solving skills, particularly those related to risk factors and staying in school, are critical to the survival of adolescents in challenging school, community, and home environments. These skills enable students to address their problems and think through solutions to them, rather than ignoring them or doing the first thing that comes into their heads. Problem-solving skills also enable students to anticipate issues, and think them through before they arise. School staff and others need to help students learn how to apply their problem-solving skills to avoid problems. Students need to be taught a specific approach to solving problems so that they can use it to help them in their current conflicts and in thinking through potential issues.

Together, these five interrelated intervention elements form an effective approach to helping youth stay in school. But they do not stand alone. Persistence, monitoring, relationship building, affiliation, and problem-solving work by being intertwined with each other. For monitoring to be successful, it must be consistent and visible to the student when risk behaviors start to show. Monitoring at its best will be done by the same person and requires at least weekly connections with the student. For relationships to support educational progress, they must focus on consistency, continuity, and persistence in the message that school is important and they must provide students with essential skills for solving problems in any setting, and everything must promote affiliation with the school so that additional supports for the student grow over time.

Check and Connect

The five intervention strategies were operationalized in a monitoring and school engagement procedure developed by the Check and Connect project. The Check and Connect procedure is a tool that can be used by school personnel to maintain students' engagement with school and to increase the social capital of students and families. Social capital is a term introduced by Coleman (1987) and in this context refers to a fundamental aim of the Check and Connect procedure: to make educational progress and success a salient issue for high risk youth, their parents or primary caregivers, and their teachers.

Check and Connect prevents students from "slipping through the cracks" by using individualized intervention strategies and helping students develop habits of successful school behavior. The procedure has two primary components, which are described in more detail in the manual *Keeping Kids in School* (Evelo, Sinclair, Hurley, Christenson, & Thurlow, 1995):

- **Check.** The purpose of this component is to systematically assess the extent to which students are engaged in school or, conversely, are exhibiting signs of school withdrawal.
- **Connect.** The purpose of this component is to respond on a regular basis to students' educational needs according to their type and level of risk for disengagement from school. All targeted students receive basic interventions. Students showing high-risk behaviors receive additional intensive interventions.

Checking students' connection with school is the strategy used to monitor indicators of risk. Student levels of engagement with school should be checked regularly—daily is preferred; weekly is the minimum. The student's level of engagement is measured by monitoring alterable risk factors such as absenteeism, suspensions, and course failure. The degree of a student's risk for dropping out is estimated on the basis of the number of incidents per month within each risk category.

Connect procedures include two levels of student focused interventions: basic strategies and intensive strategies, guided by the "Check" portion of the monitoring procedure. All students, regardless of risk, should receive basic interventions on at least a monthly basis. Four basic interven-

tions are used with all students targeted for dropout prevention interventions, regardless of their present level of engagement with school:

- General information about the role of the monitor and the purpose of the monitoring sheets is provided to each student and family.
- Regular feedback about students' overall progress in school and in relation to specific risk factors is given to each student and family.
- The importance of staying in school is discussed on a regular basis with students.
- Monitors problem-solve with students about indicators of risk and staying in school. Students can be guided through real or hypothetical problems using a cognitively oriented problem-solving plan.

These basic interventions use minimal resources to keep potential dropouts connected to school, particularly after a working relationship has been established between the monitor, student, and caregivers.

Other, more intensive interventions are implemented immediately for students exhibiting high risk in relation to any of the risk factors being monitored. The intensive connection strategies fall across three broad areas of support: academic support, problem-solving, and recreational and community service exploration. Efforts are made as much as possible to use existing resources in the schools and community to meet students needs.

Together, the basic and intensive interventions prevent students from dropping out by focusing on the individual needs and personal development of the student, on empowering families to provide educational support to their adolescents, and by making changes in the school or district to keep youth engaged in school.

Evidence of Positive Outcomes

The students with disabilities who participated in the Check and Connect procedure were less likely to "collide" with the academic and behavioral performance standards to which they were held accountable than similar students in a comparison group (Evelo, et al., 1995; Sinclair, Thurlow, Christenson, & Evelo, 1995). Significantly fewer students in the treatment group were suspended from school than similar students in the comparison group at the end of eighth grade. Also, students who participated in Check and Connect were more likely to be on track to graduate, that is, earning at least 80% of all possible credits by the end of ninth grade than similar students in the comparison group. And, fewer students in the treatment group (2%) were in correctional placements at the end of tenth grade than were students in the comparison group (12%).

Evidence supports the possibility that students can better meet academic and behavioral standards when opportunities are created for them. Additional evidence of the positive effects of the key intervention strategies and their implementation exists in the report *Staying in School* (Thurlow, Christenson, Sinclair, Evelo, & Thornton, 1995).

■ Recommendations: Evaluating the Impact of Local Policies and Practices

Schools and other local educational agencies are encouraged to examine their policies and practices, to identify both those that will support students in meeting the challenge of higher academic and behavioral performance standards and those that will serve as barriers. Standards-led reform initiatives must address the potential collision of holding students accountable for higher standards without creating the capacity for educators and families to help students achieve those standards.

All students must be empowered to reach high academic and behavioral standards. The five intervention strategies described here propose a viable means of creating opportunities and promoting social capital for students and their families. Summarized, these strategies allocate staff and resources so that: (1) students at high risk for school failure are followed persistently as they move in and out of school; (2) these students are monitored for signs of risk that can be altered by educators, family members and the students themselves; and (3) the adults who monitor the students enhance the opportunities available to help students succeed, drawing on existing resources in the schools, community, and among family members.

It is recommend that the ratio of barriers to supports be examined for students about whom educators are most concerned. In other words, *do the barriers exceed the supports available to help youth at risk stay connected to school?* How to answer this question can be formulated by local schools and communities through an action-research process. This process begins by establishing a small group of school leaders, school practitioners, family members, students, business leaders, and youth advocates. The actual process of identifying education policies that support and inhibit students' ability to meet higher performance standards serves as a catalyst for identifying and prioritizing a plan of action. Next steps include:

1. **Review current summary documents and relevant information.** Review documents that describe student performance, school dropout rates, etc., for that location and school.
2. **Examine the local policies and practices that influence at-risk youth.** Go over existing school policies on absenteeism, behavioral expectations, and academic tracks. Think about each in terms of whether it serves as a bar-

rier to students staying in school, or whether it promotes their connection to school.

3. **Prioritize barriers that can be minimized and supports that can be enhanced.** Use voting or consensus building procedures to generate prioritized listings of barriers and supports.

4. **Brainstorm a list of action steps that can be taken to address the selected issues.** Allow as many ideas as can be generated to be recorded and then prioritize them. Consensus building procedures or nominal group techniques might help with this prioritization process.

5. **Identify measurable indicators of success, such as attendance and dropout rates.** First read research reports to determine the kinds of indicators that are typically used. Then, think about the data that might be available on a specific location or that could be obtained with minimal intrusion.

6. **Develop and implement the action plan.** Assign a small group the task of preparing a possible plan. This is then reviewed by other action team members, and a final plan developed. Or, the entire group may decide to bring in a consultant to help it think through the issues and the needs before developing a plan.

7. **Allow time to revise and refine the plan.** Give the group two to four weeks to think over the plan, and to share it with others to obtain additional input.

8. **Evaluate progress in relation to the indicators of success.** Develop a plan for collecting information on a regular basis and reporting the information to the group for review.

Recognizing barriers to effective service delivery may serve as a common point of understanding among educators, parents, and the broader community. This can facilitate collaborative efforts to maximize and mobilize supports that are available within the school, community, or homes. Schools need the resources and support of parents and community professionals to optimize students' progress toward high school completion. Serving at-risk youth and their families requires high level communication, coordination, and collaboration. Standards and discipline are important, just as are finding ways to provide students with the opportunities to meet those standards. With all of these elements in place, we can tip the balance toward keeping **all** kids in school, meeting high standards, and on track to graduate.

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